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Commission on the Status of Women
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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting the situation of women or equality between women and men

Statement submitted by the American Association of Retired Persons, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, which represents over 32 million national and international members aged 50 years and older, brings to your attention an important issue that needs to be addressed, both in the preparations for the Beijing Conference +5 and World Summit for Social Development +5 sessions. The important issue that we refer to is the status of older women in the world.

Ageing is largely a woman's issue. Women live longer than men and suffer from more chronic diseases than men. Paragraph 52 of the Beijing Platform of Action states that the risk of falling into poverty is greater for women than for men, particularly in old age. Increasingly, that means living alone, and widowhood is something that women learn to expect at a very young age. Taking care of older men is also almost a universal experience of older women. Additionally, the number of grandparents taking responsibility for raising grandchildren is higher than previously estimated, and the majority of these caregivers are older women. We have a phenomenon now of greater and greater numbers of people surviving into old age, most of them into the very old age period of life.

The result of the 1998 revision of the official United Nations world population estimates and projections shed new light on the global population ageing processes. In 1998,

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66 million persons in the world were aged 80 or over — that is, about 1 of every 100 persons. This number is expected to increase almost six fold by 2050, to reach 370 million persons. And we know that the majority of these persons will be women.

In order to understand the needs, to develop policies that respond to the needs and to implement solutions around these known needs, there is an urgency for increased data on the 80-plus segment of the population in each country, and that data needs to be disaggregated not only by age cohort but also by gender. Only by doing this can effective policies and solutions be developed.

We would like to suggest some special areas where data need to be gathered on older women. United Nations agencies and Member States should collect and disaggregate by age and sex data on refugee populations. In studies of migratory patterns in developing countries, attention should also be paid to who gets left behind in the villages when migrations take place.

In many countries, older women are the silent and/or invisible generation. Even in the developed countries that have experienced "women's movements" or "women's liberation", the older woman has not benefited greatly from the changes that took place. Older women's incomes continue to be significantly lower than older men's incomes; older women are much more likely than older men to live alone; older women spend a higher proportion of their incomes on housing than their male counterparts; women are twice as likely as men to be victims of elder abuse.

We request, in this International Year of Older Persons, and in the preparations for Beijing +5, that the spotlight be placed on older women — to know who they are; to understand their issues, their status, their condition; and to include them in policies and solutions that address their particular needs. We recognize the important gender "mainstreaming" effort that is under way but caution that a move to mainstream older women without first focusing on this "invisible" generation might unwittingly lead to their further impoverishment and vulnerability.

We urge the Commission on the Status of Women to place the issue of older women on the agenda of Beijing +5 as an emerging issue which requires the attention of all member States.